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## **The discursive deployment of race talk**

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Language and Intercultural Communication, 2014 - 14(4), 460-474

# The discursive deployment of race talk

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While the language that majorities use to convey ethnic attitudes to members of their own group has received significant scholarly attention in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and the United States, the ways in which people of colour actually experience prejudice has been largely ignored. Drawing upon interviews with one young black woman in the south of England, this paper presents findings concerning the patterns of talk and the rhetorical strategies followed to recount experiences of differential treatment. The analysis, inspired by a critical discursive approach, points to the negative construction of the majority group and identifies a number of recurring devices used to bolster the facticity of the accounts. These include the presentation and quoting of self and others, the explicit invocation of category entitlements and the use of extreme case formulations, particularly in anticipation of non-sympathetic hearings. Given the prohibitions on making accusations of racism, the paper culminates with a discussion on factuality which this research attributes to the presence of the white interviewer.

Ενώ η γλώσσα που χρησιμοποιούν οι λευκοί για να μεταφέρουν εθνικές απόψεις σε μέλη της ομάδας τους έχει λάβει σημαντική επιστημονική προσοχή σε χώρες όπως η Αυστραλία, η Νέα Ζηλανδία, η Ολλανδία και οι Ηνωμένες Πολιτείες, οι τρόποι με τους οποίους οι μειονότητες αντιλαμβάνονται τον ρατσισμό σε μεγάλο βαθμό αγνοούνται. Αντλώντας στοιχεία από συνεντεύξεις με μια νεαρή μαύρη γυναίκα στο νότο της Αγγλίας, το παρόν έγγραφο παρουσιάζει ευρήματα σχετικά με την ρητορική στρατηγική που ακολουθείται όταν εμπειρίες διαφορετικής μεταχείρισης περιγράφονται. Η ανάλυση, εμπνευσμένη από μια κριτική προσέγγιση, αποκαλύπτει την αρνητική παρουσίαση της πλειοψηφούσας ομάδας εστιάζοντας τη προσοχή σε μια σειρά επαναλαμβανόμενων τεχνικών. Αυτές περιλαμβάνουν τη χρήση του πλάγιου λόγου και τη ρητή επίκληση γνώσεων και ακραίων περιπτώσεων, ιδίως ενόψει πιθανών αμφιβολιών. Λαμβάνοντας υπόψη τους κοινωνικούς κανόνες που απαγορεύουν την άδικη εκτόξευση κατηγοριών, το έγγραφο συζητά τη ρητορική κατασκευή της πραγματικότητας και την αποδίδει στην παρουσία του λευκού ερευνητή.

**Keywords:** people of colour; rhetorical strategies; Critical Discourse Analysis; differential treatment; racism; factuality

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, there has been much discussion about the reproduction of racism through everyday talk and conversation. Several discourse studies have

analysed the language that majorities use to convey ethnic attitudes to members of their own group in countries such as Australia (Augoustinos, Tuffin & Rapley, 1999; Augoustinos, Tuffin & Sale, 1999), New Zealand (Nairn & McCreanor, 1991; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), the Netherlands (van Dijk, 1984, 1987), and the United States (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Kleiner, 1998). These studies have collectively revealed that the 'old' racism of slavery, segregation and systematic discrimination against minority out-groups has been widely replaced with a more subtle and coded form, commonly referred to as the 'new racism' (Barker, 1981). The new racism differs from the older kind in that it does not explain contemporary racial inequalities in terms of biological traits or phenotype. Instead, it relies on social characteristics (e.g. concerns over unemployment) and cultural differences ('migrants do not work hard enough') to justify existing exclusionary practices (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Delanty, Jones & Wodak, 2008). Much less is, however, known about the ways in which people of colour actually experience prejudice as a result of new racism.

In fact, apart from a few groundbreaking exceptions (e.g. Essed, 1991; Feagin & Sike, 1994), academic research has been very slow to include minorities in discourse studies of this sort. This being the case, the present paper reports findings from an extended case study of one 18-year-old woman from Nigeria who spent a significant period of time living, studying and working in the south of England. The study aimed to explore the patterns of talk and the rhetorical strategies used in a series of in-depth active interviews on race and racism by applying a Critical Discourse Analysis approach to data taken from a wider research project on the adaptation experiences of international students in the UK. Research such as this will contribute towards a greater understanding of contemporary race talk and serve as an impetus for

continuing discussions about racial inequality from the perspective of the marginalised.

### **Race talk**

One approach to systematically investigating and conceptualising the ways in which negative ethnic attitudes are reproduced through everyday conversation and interpersonal communication has been offered by van Dijk (1984, 1987) in his discourse-analytic studies in the Netherlands and in California. These studies explored the crucial properties of contemporary racism through a series of informal opinion interviews, which revealed how prejudiced talk is organised rhetorically so that attributions of racism may be avoided or denied (van Dijk, 1992). In order to explain this, van Dijk (1987) first draws attention to the notion of ‘impression management’ (cf. Goffman, 1969) to point to a strategic model of communicative interaction that enables members of the majority group to complain about the out-group whilst blocking unfavourable evaluative inferences about themselves. According to this model, majorities are generally anxious not to be seen as ‘racist’ because they are aware that negative talk about minorities may be heard as biased and as inconsistent with democratic and humanitarian ideals pertinent to most Western societies (see also Billig, 1991; Galasinska & Galasinski, 2003). For this reason, van Dijk (1984) suggests, majorities choose to advance their arguments through the use of less direct and more subtle discursive means (e.g. denials, disclaimers) or to follow a double strategy of ‘positive self-presentation’ and ‘negative other-presentation’. The primary function of this is to protect the ‘face’ of the speaker and thus avoid the damaging charge of being prejudiced.

One powerful way this double strategy is accomplished is through stories about undesirable out-group behaviour (LeCouteur & Augoustinos, 2001). Told

particularly by those who live in ethnically mixed communities, these stories are ‘the narrative of the group who portrays themselves as the “real” victim of immigration or desegregation’ (van Dijk, 1987, p. 387). Van Dijk (1993a, 2002) identifies three negative topic types in storytelling discourse, which explain how members of dominant white in-groups safely express their racist sentiments: *difference*, *deviance*, and *threat*. Whereas the first topic type frames ethnic out-groups purely in terms of how different they look, the other two refer to problematic actions and events that show the negative things people of colour do in contrast with the more ‘civilised’ manners of the majority. Barker and Galasinski (2001) agree, and add that the distinction between the two groups is further reinforced by the frequent use of the first-person plural pronoun ‘we’. Their argument is echoed by De Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak (1999) who conducted focus group discussions and problem-centred qualitative interviews on the discursive construction of national identity in different provinces of Austria. This research recognised the relational nature of race and ethnicity, and described how respondents deployed ‘we’ repeatedly to preserve, support and protect a common culture that had been threatened by the out-group in one way or another. Allied to this tactic were hedges and other mitigating formulations with which speakers negotiated accounts of negative stereotyping (Wodak, 2000).

However, such negative descriptions of ethnic out-groups would have relatively little direct influence on whole populations were they not reported by the mainstream media (Jiwani & Richardson, 2011). This is because, as van Dijk (1993b) explains, large segments of the white public have little inside knowledge of minority communities to form opinions that are at variance with those expressed or implied by the news reports they read. At the same time, relevant research in mass

communication has shown that the news media are the main cultural sites where the ideas of the powerful are presented (Campbell, 1995; Fleras & Kunz, 2001), and that these ideas circulate within the in-group as a kind of reality that manufactures the ethnic consensus (Downing & Husband, 2005). Essed (2002) also discusses the persuasive role of the mainstream media in the formation of general ethnic attitudes. She takes the argument a step further to suggest that people of colour have learnt to interpret specific news discourse forms as 'racist' through on-going experiences of differential treatment in a range of everyday situations. For her, these often enable minorities to detect the techniques of media persuasion, and thus develop a 'double-consciousness' (cf. Du Bois, 1969) as a result of seeing themselves through their own and others' eyes. Yet, this view is in direct contrast to empirical findings (e.g. Shelton, 2003), which suggests that minorities typically see themselves as objects of discrimination so as to experience what appear to the outside observer as equal-status dynamics in different terms.

Whether seen as real or imagined, experiences of everyday racism find their outlet in the counter-stories that people of colour share with one another in their communities (Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Feagin, 2000). In contrast with those told by members of the majority group, these stories focus on 'culturally and historically constructed themes that reverberate, often unconsciously, in individual accounts' (Bell, 2003, p. 4). Young (2004) shares this perspective, and points out how counter-stories provide some crucial evidence in which the past lives on in the present through well-established patterns of racist exclusion. According to him, these patterns mark structural opportunities of exclusive or preferential access to scarce social resources that continue to keep minority group members 'at the bottom of society's well' (Bell, 1992, p. vi). For Solórzano and Yosso (2002, pp. 32-33) however, they additionally

produce worldviews and dynamic forms of resistance which find expression in at least three general types of counter-storytelling. First, *personal stories* which ‘recount an individual’s experiences with various forms of racism; second, *other people’s stories* which ‘reveal experiences and responses to racism as told in a third person voice’; and third, *composite stories* that ‘draw on various forms of “data” to recount the racialized experiences of people of colour’. The third type, they explain, concentrates on both biographical and autobiographical information so as to better portray all those whose lives are daily affected by racism, and who may otherwise remain silenced or uncompensated.

Critical race scholars, who have paid attention to these three types of counter-storytelling, argue that minorities use them strategically in order to challenge the mainstream discourse on race, and thus eventually shift the racial order in their favour (Warren, 2000; Zikes, 2009). Delgado (1989/2005), for instance, was among the first to highlight the strategic functions of counter-storytelling for individual narrators and their communities, and to explain how they rely on narrative to validate their experiences in the face of an oppressive culture that distorts and marginalises their lived realities. Ewick and Silbey (2003) have also discussed the purpose and importance of counter-stories in minority discourse, asserting that the understandings they embody strengthen the out-group in ways that give rise to a shared sense of belonging. A similar view, from the perspective of critical race pedagogy, has also been offered by Bell (2003) who studied the stories that college-educated adults from various racial backgrounds told about race and racism during in-depth interviews. This study acknowledged the powerful role that counter-narrative plays, and described how respondents of colour framed their arguments against the dominant in-group that purported to be neutral and objective. Regrettably, however, the analysis



paid little, if any, direct attention to the linguistic mechanisms that characterised these counter-storytelling practices, and therefore incomplete evidence as to precisely how people of colour advance their interests calls for additional research in the area.

With this in mind, the present case study is aimed towards investigating counter-storytelling through Critical Discourse Analysis, looking specifically at the patterns of talk and the rhetorical strategies one 18-year-old woman from Nigeria used to recount her experiences of racism in the south of England. The analysis focuses on the use of ‘positive self-presentation’ and ‘negative other-presentation’ tactics as explored, described and theorised by van Dijk (1984, 1987) to suggest strategic functions that subvert relations of power and dominance through the presentation and evaluation of behaviours.

### **The participant**

The participant, for whom I used the pseudonym Isioma, was an 18-year-old woman who had spent almost all her life with her parents and two brothers in a south-eastern Nigerian neighbourhood before moving to the south of England. Because of her father’s involvement in the petroleum industry in the Niger Delta region she described her family as a ‘happy, prosperous and supportive’ one able to fulfil her educational needs. A very enthusiastic and determined student, she progressed successfully through primary and secondary education in Nigeria. After obtaining her school leaving certificate, she gained entry to a foundation/access programme for international students in the south of England. On entry, she planned to extend her period of residence in the UK for an extra three years in order to pursue an undergraduate degree in the discipline of sociology. This, as she suggested, would help her re-negotiate the position of women in Nigerian society on her return home. Her native command of English meant that she would be able to respond, at least

partially, to the demands of higher education and thus achieve her long-term objective.

However, through informal networking with academic members of staff working in the foundation/access programme, I became aware that Isioma was experiencing some degree of socio-cultural adjustment stress, which is common to many African student sojourners at the start of their stay in a new environment (Maundeni, 2001). This encouraged me to send her an email message, informing her about the project and inviting her to meet with me to further discuss the research focus that was planned. During the meeting, I explained that I was only looking for students who had recently arrived in the UK in order to capture their experiences as they happened instead of retrospectively, and that they had to commit themselves to the study for a period of nine months. Isioma gave her consent to participate without any prompting, assuming that the three two-hour long semi-structured interviews on which the study relied would enable her to acclimatise faster to the new environment. An important reason for her decision was that the interviews were conducted by a non-British, yet visibly white, researcher who had extensive experience of living, studying and working in the UK first as an international student and then as a university lecturer.

### **Positionality**

Despite being acceptable to the participant, I remained very alert to issues surrounding the positionality of the researcher when undertaking critical race work. Shelton (2000) reports that many white interviewers lead minority group members to behave in a manner that confirms their expectations, while Hepburn (2003) goes on even further to suggest that interview data might be misinterpreted in situations where

confidence deficits come into play. A further issue is that minorities manage accusations of racism sensitively because the person who accuses the other as 'racist' may be perceived to be unreasonable and extreme (Augoustinos & Every, 2010). Kirkwood, McKinlay and McVittie (2013) reflected on this issue during the course of semi-structured interviews with adult asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow concluding that minorities can downplay discrimination when the interviewer comes from the white majority group. This possibility was, however, offset in the present study because of my former international student status which encouraged Isioma to have confidence in me.

## **Method**

Shortly after our initial meeting the first interview took place. This focused on obtaining background contextual information about Isioma's earliest experiences of race and racism, so that these could inform subsequent interviews where appropriate. Subsequent interviews were held at approximately three month intervals in an attempt to explore the ways in which residence abroad had affected, if at all, her perspective about the subject over a period of time. Following Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) model of active interviewing where the informant is continually developed in relation to the on-going interview interaction, all interviews were conceptualised with a general guide approach that grouped a series of open-ended questions under topics relevant to everyday racism: conceptualisations of race and racism, attitudes towards whiteness and white people, and past and present experiences with race and racism. During the course of the interviews, general or non-specific questions were asked before specific ones to encourage spontaneous responses, and follow-up questions were used to clarify meaning as well as to enable the participant to elaborate on the

attitudes and opinions obtained in her own terms. Because the latter explicitly invited Isioma to tell counter-stories about acts of resistance to discriminatory practices, recurring throughout the interviews were incidents of racism which she recalled to better contextualise or define an issue.

The initial analysis of the data was conducted as soon as the first interview had been transcribed. This involved listening to tapes and reading transcripts repeatedly until discrete units of relevant meaning began to emerge. I scrutinised each interview to determine whether any of these naturally clustered together, and after this I wrote a summary delineating one or more central themes that expressed the essence of these units. During this time, I returned to Isioma with the aim of checking my interpretations of her responses against ‘informant feedback’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and thus modifying or adding themes to future interviews as necessary. Once completing the initial analysis, my second step was to re-visit the data in order to single out bounded segments in the transcription in which the participant told a counter-story. Using the criteria outlined in van Dijk (1984, 1987), bounded segments counted as counter-stories if they contained rhetorical strategies of critiquing the majority group. These were then incorporated into a composite summary of the findings, thereby gathering a sizable sample of approximately 20 incidents aimed at the reversal of power. Central to these incidents was the theme of *differential treatment* which the following section presents through discussion of five chronologically ordered Counter-stories reflecting the sequence in which events appear in Isioma’s life.

### **Differential treatment**

The discursive construction of differential treatment in the participant’s talk seems to follow a very clear rhetorical pattern of argumentation which repeats itself in almost

all the Counter-stories presented below. Like most ‘racist’ discourses (see Delanty, Jones & Wodak, 2008), it starts with the labelling of the (white) actors involved, proceeds to the generalisation of negative attributions and then elaborates arguments or standardised themes to support certain opinions. Counter-story 1 taken from the first interview provides an illustrative example of this pattern as Isioma attempts to respond to the universal question: ‘Could you tell me what white people are like?’

**Counter-story 1**

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| 1 Int.   | Could you tell me what white people are like?  |
| 2 Isioma | They’re nice in the beginning, but when you get to know them they are not so nice        |
| 3        | because in reality, they see us as a threat. They think we’re taking their jobs and they |
| 4        | are afraid of losing their identity. They don’t want to accept some new things.          |
| 5 Int.   | mmm  |
| 6 Isioma | And there was a kid and he was killed by four white men and the police                   |
| 7        | never really investigated.   |
| 8 Int.   | What makes you say this?   |
| 9 Isioma | They didn’t care because he was black. If it was a white man in Nigeria, we’d try to     |
| 10       | find out. You just need to come and see for yourself.                                    |

Following the interviewer’s question, the first section of this Counter-story begins with an ‘apparent concession’ which, for van Dijk (1992), constitutes an important strategic prelude to statements that may threaten the positive face of the speaker. We see this in line 2 where Isioma states ‘They’re nice in the beginning, but...’ and by so doing undermines the possibility that her views are biased or imbalanced. There follows a generalised description of the threats that minority group members are perceived to pose to the dominant culture which Isioma illustrates with a number of quasi-rational arguments – ‘they think we’re taking their jobs and they are afraid of losing their identity’ (ll. 3-4) – commonly cited in white communities. The section culminates with the assertion ‘they don’t want to accept some new things’ (l. 4) which justifies and legitimates the categorisation of ‘not so nice people’ introduced in line 2.

In the section which follows the interviewer’s unmarked acknowledgement (‘mmm’, l. 5), Isioma attempts to externalise the grounds for this assertion by perhaps assuming that she is orienting to a rather sceptical interviewer. In so doing, she refers

to one murder case incident reported in the anti-racist press (see Note 1), thereby echoing van Dijk's (1993b) point that everyday conversations on race relations depend on news media information. Although the description she provides here is quite vague in that the victim is not explicitly named, what is particularly emphasised is the number and identity of the offenders – 'four white men' (l. 6). This emphasis, combined with the claim that 'the police never really investigated' (ll. 6-7), allows her to suggest that 'old' racism continues to exist side by side the more quasi-rational arguments of exclusion outlined earlier and provides a context for the accusation targeted at the police: 'They didn't care because he was black' (l. 9).

While making this explicit accusation, Isioma is also interested in enhancing the positive presentation of her own group as fair and even-handed. As such, she deploys the well-known 'we/they' dichotomy which in lines 9-10 serves to highlight the more serious investigation that the Nigerian police would launch under similar circumstances – 'If it was a white man in Nigeria, we'd try to find out' – aside from constructing the two categories as highly distinct and homogenous. And the invitation 'You just need to come and see for yourself' (l. 10) enhances credibility by working against non-sympathetic readings.

Another example of the rhetorical pattern outlined above can be found in Counter-story 2 taken from the second interview. This Counter-story follows a passage of talk in which Isioma had been describing her experiences of differential treatment in public transport and the interviewer asks 'Can you give me a more specific example?'

#### **Counter-story 2**

- |   |        |   |
|---|--------|---|
| 1 | Int.   | Can you give me a more specific example?  |
| 2 | Isioma | Well, yesterday I was on the bus. I told the bus driver where I was going. I said, "to the city centre double" and he just gave me a single. He couldn't understand me. |
| 3 |        |   |
| 4 |        | But, it's English. I speak in English. I gave him the money and   |
| 5 |        | I said, "city centre double" and he was like, "what, what did you say?"   |
| 6 |        | So, I asked again. I said, "double to the city centre" and he was "What? Single?"   |

7 Int.	So, he couldn't understand?
8 Isioma	No, he could understand because English is my official language. It's always
9	this. They don't like blacks.

Like the previous Counter-story, this one begins with a less direct argumentative strategy which once again enables Isioma to create a good impression in the sight of the interviewer. We see this in line 3 where she remarks 'He couldn't understand me' as if she wants to imply that she is prepared to accept evidence which may invalidate her claim. Yet, what happens next is that she repairs her implied suggestion through the use of 'category entitlement' (Potter, 1996). More specifically, she invokes her native command of English – 'But, it's English. I speak in English' (l. 4) – to construct her talk as credible and reliable and continues by providing the specifics of the description. Central to these specifics is the discursive device of reported speech which, as the literature has repeatedly shown (e.g. Holt, 1996; Stokoe & Edwards, 2007), helps make claims more factual and less open to charges that the speaker is mistaken. This can be detected, for instance, in lines 5 and 6 where Isioma reports two alternative versions of the same ticket request – 'I said, "city centre double"', 'I said, "double to the city centre"' – thereby discounting the possibility that her claim is invalid. However, it is only after the interviewer's clarification question – 'So, he couldn't understand?' (l. 7) – that Isioma confirms the hypothesis of racism explicitly. In so doing, she once again invokes her native command of English – 'No, he could understand because English is my official language' (l. 8) and culminates the talk with a very assertive statement – 'It's always this. They don't like blacks' (ll. 8-9) showing that the behaviour is typical of the whole majority group.

Given that the interviewer's clarification question (see l. 7) displayed some degree of doubt, the next Counter-story follows directly from the previous one in that it is opened with the question 'Have you had any other problems with language?' In

response to this question, Isioma recounts another language-related incident she has had by now referring to her workplace experiences.

### Counter-story 3

- 1 Int. Have you had any other problems with language?  
2 Isioma Yeah, where I work in McDonald's, the manager, she keeps picking on me.  
3 One time, she called me and told me, "what's the problem with you?  
4 Every time I tell you to do something, you're not doing. Is it that you don't  
5 understand me?" I said, "what? I speak English. English is my first language"  
6 and she said, "no, you don't understand me because I've told you to keep smiling"  
7 and I said, "what? I can't stand in front of the till for 10 hours and keep smiling".  
8 It would be nice, but the white customers are picking on me. They're so nasty.  
9 Int. Why?  
10 Isioma Like when you serve them, most of the times the problem is from the kitchen.  
11 It's like a customer makes a special order, just like he might not want lettuce  
12 and things like that, and when it comes out, my colleagues get a bit confused, and  
13 they come back and say, "what's this? Is this a joke?" It's not my fault. It's from the  
14 white people in the kitchen.

After presenting the manager as a person who 'keeps picking on [Isioma]' (l. 2), the first section of this Counter-story begins in line 3-7 with the use of reported speech as an attempt at illustrating one brief exchange the two parties have had. The exchange is opened by the manager who uses the 'extreme case formulation' (Pomerantz, 1986) 'every time' (l. 4), a device which suggests that there is a long history of problematic interactions with Isioma, and continues with the question 'Is it that you don't understand me?' (ll. 4-5). Isioma responds defensively and perhaps cautiously by once again referring to her native command of English – 'I said, "...I speak English. English is my first language."' (l. 5) – thereby enhancing credibility in much the same way we saw in Counter-story 2. This response, however, does not seem to satisfy the manager who proceeds to present the issue for which Isioma might be deemed responsible – 'She said, "no...because I've told you to keep smiling"' (l. 6) – and by so doing rejects the suggestion that the participant is a knowledgeable user of English. The exchange culminates with Isioma's explanation – 'I said, "...I can't stand in front of the till for 10 hours and keep smiling"' (l. 7) which is constructed carefully given the use of a 'transfer disclaimer' (van Dijk, 1992) aimed at the avoidance of negative impression formation. This is detected in line 8 where Isioma transfers the cause of



her facial expression to the white customers – ‘It would be nice, but...’ – in order to make her evaluative judgment – ‘They’re so nasty’ – appear more acceptable.

In the second section of the Counter-story (ll. 9-14), Isioma attempts to absolve herself of all responsibility by recounting one problematic situation that explains the customer’s impolite behaviour. In so doing, she uses the extreme case formulation ‘*most of the times* the problem is from the kitchen’ (l. 10), which suggests that the situation she is describing is neither odd nor random, but regular and frequent. Thus, it cannot be easily dismissed by the interviewer who, in line 9, questioned the grounds for her evaluative judgement. This extreme case formulation is further qualified in lines 11-12 where Isioma recounts the details of the situation in order to make a more targeted claim that may not risk refutation by single exceptions. She starts by drawing attention to special orders – ‘just like [a customer] might not want lettuce’ (l. 11) – and continues with a specific reference to her colleagues who ‘get a bit confused’ (l. 12) when customers alter the menu offerings. In this way, she builds up a more plausible context for the customer complaints that follow – ‘what’s this? Is this a joke?’ (l. 13) – which, although justifiable, encourage her to make her final defensive comment: ‘It’s not my fault. It’s from the white people in the kitchen’ (ll. 13-14).

Bearing in mind the problems encountered in the workplace, the third interview began with the question ‘What’s happening at work?’ in order to explore the extent to which Isioma’s experiences had changed over a period of time. Isioma responds that she has ‘just quit’ and provides one explanation for her resignation.

#### **Counter-story 4**

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| 1 Int.   | What’s happening at work?   |
| 2 Isioma | Recently, I just quit.  |
| 3 Int.   | Why?  |
| 4 Isioma | One time, I worked for seven hours and it’s illegal because I didn’t get a break, and |
| 5        | then I asked my manager if I could get a break and she was like, “no, no, no because  |
| 6        | everyone wants a break”   |

7 Int.                Yeah  
 8 Isioma            Yeah, but other people, like those who worked less hours than me, they got a break  
 9                      and they were white, and I said, “this is the first time I complain because I worked  
 10                     for seven hours and I need a break”, and my friend, who is white, he said,  
 11                     “you should press charges against her”, and he went and told the manager to help me,  
 12                     and after a while she was like, “sure, sure”.

In this Counter-story, Isioma reports one form of negative behaviour her manager carried out against her as an explanation for her resignation. She begins in line 4 by characterising this behaviour as ‘illegal’ given that it is uncommon to work for ‘seven hours’ without a break, and continues in lines 5-6 with the manager’s response to her request for one – ‘she was like, “no, no, no because everyone wants a break”’ – as a way of attesting to the difficult working conditions she has been experiencing. In formulating the manager’s response as ‘everyone wants a break’ however, Isioma seems to be proposing that she is one of the many people who make such requests and by so doing undermines the claim of differential treatment she has so carefully worked up in line 4. This is immediately followed by the interviewer’s acknowledgement – ‘Yeah’ – in line 7 which, albeit minimal, encourages Isioma to repair her statement through the use of contrast structures. We see these in lines 8-9 where she compares her treatment with the treatment of her white colleagues – ‘those who worked less hours than me, they got a break and they were white’ – thereby implying that the manager’s negative behaviour was based on racial motives.

In the remainder of the Counter-story, Isioma provides further details of the claim she is making by perhaps aiming to counter the impact of the interviewer’s unsympathetic response. In so doing, she reports one direct quotation from the incident evident in line 9 where she uses the minimum case proportional measure ‘first time’ to indicate that she is not the kind of person who complains frequently and unjustifiably, whilst also importing a white ‘friend’ into the conversation who, as she suggests, helped her to mediate the dispute. The reference to him may appear

somewhat surprising when considering the negative evaluations she has made about whites in the Counter-stories she has already told. However, as van Dijk (1987) points out, speakers often tend to refer to unbiased others in situations where their positive face is threatened in order to render their statements more trustworthy. It is, therefore, possible that Isioma attempts to manage the impressions of the interviewer through a separate corroborating witness who is entitled to judge the situation because of his ‘expert’ knowledge on whiteness. And the inclusion of his quoted speech – ‘he said, “you should press charges against her”’ (ll. 10-11) helps to present the claim as an objective reflection of reality rather than a personal opinion.

The last Counter-story selected for analysis follows from the previous one in that the interviewer attempts to identify whether Isioma has made any other white friends. Isioma begins by suggesting that she has tried and continues with the description provided in lines 4-8.

#### **Counter-story 5**

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 1 Int.    | Have you made any other white friends apart from him?                                |
| 2 Isioma  | I’ve tried.  |
| 3 Int.    | How?   |
| 4 Isioma  | I approached the sports office to find out if I can play table-tennis. I wrote three |
| 5         | letters, but they didn’t reply. Maybe, they were busy. But, I think they realised by |
| 6         | surname that I’m Nigerian and they didn’t reply. It’s always the colour because I    |
| 7         | also went to see them and they told me that the girl who takes the registration fee  |
| 8         | was on her lunch break. Do you believe this?   |
| 9 Int.    | mmm  |
| 10 Isioma | They’d rather not have me there, and if you ask them, they’ll tell you directly.     |
| 11 Int.   | What do you mean?  |
| 12 Isioma | I mean they wouldn’t tell you because you’re my friend.                              |

In lines 4-8 Isioma recalls the steps she has undertaken to make white friends by suggesting that she has approached the sports office to this effect. She begins by referring to the ‘three letters’ (ll. 4-5) she has sent the employees and continues with one possible explanation for their ignorance. As with all explanations we have seen so far, this one is introduced cautiously in that Isioma uses mitigating discourse features such as ‘maybe’ (l. 5) and ‘I think’ (l. 5) to prevent negative impressions, before

going on to attribute the ignorance to prejudices related to nationality and country of origin – ‘they realised by my surname that I’m Nigerian...’ (ll. 5-6). This attribution is then unpacked in lines 6-8 where Isioma states ‘It’s always the colour’ and in so doing proceeds to provide further supporting evidence for her claim. Here, she emphasises that ‘[she] also went to see them’ (l. 7), thereby discounting the possibility that she was ignored as an isolated occurrence. She finishes her turn with one question – ‘Do you believe this?’ – which presumably asks the interviewer to confirm the unreasonable nature of the statement the employees made when they saw her: ‘the girl who takes the registration fee [is] on her lunch break’ (ll. 7-8).

The interviewer responds with an unmarked acknowledgement: ‘mmm’ (l. 9). Although this, at first sight, can be interpreted as an encouraging signal inviting Isioma to respond herself – ‘They’d rather not have me there’ (l. 10) – what the concluding part of the turn shows is that she is anticipating unsympathetic hearings. More specifically, Isioma states ‘if you ask them, they’ll tell you directly’ (l. 10) as if she wants to strengthen the claim through a credibility enhancing invitation that may be less open to challenge. This invitation is, however, followed by the interviewer’s clarification question in line 11, which encourages Isioma to understand that she is constructing the interviewer as a member of the majority group rather than an ally. Her understanding is displayed in line 12 where she states ‘I mean they wouldn’t tell you because you’re my friend’ and by so doing engages in a ‘redressive action’ (Brown & Levinson, 1978) that allows her to counteract the potentially face-damaging effects of the invitation.

## **Discussion**

The present case study has examined the patterns of talk and the rhetorical strategies used by one 18-year-old woman from Nigeria in a series of in-depth active interviews on race and racism in the south of England. Using the criteria outlined in van Dijk (1984, 1987), the preceding analysis revealed that one of the most pervasive features of the participant's talk was the negative construction of the majority group. Given the prohibitions on making claims of differential treatment (Augoustinos & Every, 2010), this negativity was not expressed in overtly derogatory terms, but was frequently embedded in positive face-saving strategies. These were detected in almost all the Counter-stories presented above in that the negative construction of majorities was often preceded by apparent concessions (e.g. 'they're nice in the beginning, but...') and transfer disclaimers (e.g. 'it would be nice, but the white customers...') aimed at enhancing the self-presentation of the speaker as balanced, neutral and fair. After such disclaimers, various standardised themes were employed to account for the generally negative portrayals, thereby organising the argument in similar ways to those identified by van Dijk (1992) and other researchers (e.g. Billig, 1991; Galasinska & Galasinski, 2003) in their examination of everyday talk among white people. In the talk about threats, for example, we saw how Isioma constructed racially distinguishable 'foreigners' as disadvantaged by specific social institutions, such as the police.

In addition to standardised themes, the analysis also identified a number of other salient and recurring discursive features with which the participant introduced claims of differential treatment. One such recurring feature was the discursive device of reported speech, which, for Holt (1996, p. 230) enables speakers to give 'an air of objectivity' to a descriptive account. This was detected in Counter-story 2 where reference was made to one unpleasant encounter Isioma had with a presumably biased

bus driver, and in Counter-stories 3 and 4 in which the participant's difficult working conditions were compared to and contrasted with those of her white colleagues. Of particular significance here were also 'category entitlements' (Potter, 1996) and 'extreme case formulations' (Pomerantz, 1986), which, like reported speech, worked to establish the factual accuracy and sincerity of the reports. Note, for example, how Isioma spoke of her native command of English in Counter-stories 2 and 3 to make racially-based claims more robust, and how she amplified the impact of her negative experiences through the use of maximum case proportional measures (e.g. 'most of the times'), particularly in adversarial situations. Several studies on contemporary race talk (e.g. Augoustinos, Tiffin & Rapley, 1999; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Stokoe & Edwards, 2007) report similar discursive strategies, and together point to some kind of 'reality production kit' (Hepburn, 2003) that manages the dilemma of stake.

Finally, while there can be many reasons for the discursive construction of factuality in the aforementioned examples, one possible explanation, as van Dijk (2008) suggests, is that conversational contexts play an important role in the reproduction of prejudiced discourse. Indeed, discourse-analytic studies have described how interviewees bolster the facticity of their accounts when doubt has been displayed or is anticipated, concluding that any stretch of 'racist' talk should be best treated as a 'collaborative accomplishment' of all those who are co-present (Condor et al., 2006). The present case study noted the logical corollary of this conclusion in that more detailed complaints were provided after the interviewer's minimal acknowledgements (e.g. 'mmm', 'yeah') and clarification questions. For example, in the talk about the workplace, we observed how Isioma imported a white 'friend' into the conversation to escape the criticism signalled by the unmarked

‘yeah’. That unmarked acknowledgements are regularly taken as betokening disagreement has been well documented in sociolinguistic research (e.g. Schegloff, 1982) over 30 years ago. However, what this research has not, as yet, discussed is that such acknowledgements can have varying effects on minority group discourse. Kirkwood, McKinlay and McVittie (2013), for instance, report samples of minority talk in which minimal responses discouraged the explicit avowal of racist accusations, thereby pointing to an important dissimilarity between their own and the present study.

Undoubtedly, a range of factors may have caused the obvious lack of heavy hedging and mitigation in the participant’s talk, especially when considering that both studies were undertaken by a white academic. However, the one vital factor on which this lack rests is that the two interactants shared more similarities than differences. For example, as I have previously noted, the interviewer was an international student herself for almost eight years before becoming a UK lecturer. Thus, despite her visibly different racial background, she was capable, according to Isioma, of understanding the many challenges that international students face when attempting to adapt to a new socio-cultural environment. Moreover, research on socio-cultural adjustment (e.g. Maundeni, 2001) has shown that African students confine serious problem discussions to an academic they feel particularly close to even when such discussions threaten the positive face of the addressee. The results provided by this study corroborate evidence of previous research in that the credibility enhancing invitation which Isioma extended in Counter-story 5 did make racist accusations explicit, despite having a face-damaging effect on the interviewer. This finding has important methodological implications for future research, as it suggests that it may be the presence of a fieldworker with relatively similar background experiences which

provides access to unmitigated minority group talk. Consequently, if our aim is to elicit meaningful data from people of colour, we may have to revisit the conditions under which such data may emerge.

Overall, this paper has provided a snapshot of the patterns of talk and rhetorical strategies used to recount experiences of racism through an extended case study of one 18-year-old woman from Nigeria. Although limited to a focus on just one participant, the present study has contributed to the nascent body of research advocating the inclusion of minorities in studies of race talk, thus acting as an important catalyst for further investigations in the area.

#### Notes

1. In another part of the interview, not reported here, Isioma clarified that she was referring to the Stephen Lawrence case, a racially motivated murder that has received extensive, world-wide media coverage.

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